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THE IRONIES IN CARDINAL WILLIAM OF SABINA'S SUPPOSED PRONOUNCEMENT ON ICELANDIC INDEPENDENCE

BY DAVID ASHURST

STURLA ÞÓRÐARSON'S *HÁKONAR SAGA HÁKONARSONAR* has a reputation for being a somewhat dry narrative, 'full of informative details and correspondingly dull to read' (Jónas Kristjánsson 1992, 314). It has long been recognised, however, that the saga is shot through with irony (Schach 1993, 160), which makes the work a great deal more attractive than it might have been, at least for readers who have an eye and a taste for such things. The presence of this irony is hardly surprising in view of the circumstances in which the saga was composed. Sturla, one of the Icelandic chieftains most notably opposed to the establishment of Norwegian rule over Iceland, had found himself obliged, in 1263, to go to Norway and swear fealty. A little while later, King Magnús Hákonarson commissioned him to write the life of his father, King Hákon Hákonarson, who died at about this time. Sturla therefore had to find acceptably positive ways of representing Hákon despite inconvenient facts such as that he had effectively eliminated jarl Skúli, the ambitious Norwegian nobleman who was King Magnús's maternal grandfather, and that he had instigated the death of Sturla's own close kinsman, Snorri Sturluson. It seems, furthermore, that Sturla had to work under the scrutiny of Magnús, who wanted the saga to be written *eftir sjálfs hans ráði ok inna vitrustu manna forsögn* 'in accordance with his own will and the instruction of the wisest men' (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, II 234). In these difficult circumstances the skill with which Sturla manages to convey realities at odds with the apparent drift of his text is impressive and frequently entertaining. To give just one example before centring on the main text to be analysed: at a late stage in his narrative Sturla explains that Hákon set off to Denmark with armed forces at the request of the Danish king Christoforus, who needed military assistance against his enemies; while en route Hákon received news that Christoforus was already dead, but that his queen still wished for Norwegian aid; in connection with Hákon's decision to proceed with the expedition despite the altered strategic outlook, Sturla observes that *var þat eigi konungs háttr, at halda eigi orð sín* 'it was not the nature of a king (or the king) not to keep his word' (Sturla 1887, 307). By the time Hákon reached Copenhagen, we are then

told, the queen had come to terms with some of her enemies and wanted the Norwegians to go home again; an exchange of gifts took place, *en þat fannzt í orðum Hákonar konungs, at honum þóttu Danir eigi haldit hafa þat sem þeir höfðu ráðit sín í milli* ‘but it was apparent from King Hákon’s words that he thought the Danes had not kept to what he and they had decided between them’ (p. 307). This remark is obscure unless it prompts the reader to remember that there was a long-standing dispute between Hákon and the Danish rulers concerning some compensation which Hákon believed was due to him following an earlier rebuff (p. 268) and which he had tried several times to collect; in this way Sturla hints that Hákon’s military aid had in fact been bought with the promise of a settlement and that this had a bearing on his decision to continue with the expedition after the death of Christoforus—in short that, although it was not the king’s nature to break his word, in this case nature was helped out by an ulterior motive.

One of the best-known passages in the saga concerns a ruling on Icelandic independence, which was supposedly made by the papal legate, William of Sabina, when he visited Norway to crown Hákon in 1247. Sturla notes that, during the cardinal’s stay, Heinrekr Kársson was made bishop of Hólar; and he adds the following (p. 252):

Þá var ok sú skipan [gör] til Íslands með ráði kardinála, at sú þjóð, er þar bygði, þjónaði til Hákonar konungs; þvíat hann kallaði þat ósannligt, at land þat þjónaði eigi undir einhvern konung sem öll önnur í veröldunni.

At that time also an order was made concerning Iceland, on the advice of the cardinal, that the people who lived there should pay homage to King Hákon, because he declared it improper that that land did not serve under some king like all others in the world.

The account continues by declaring that the chieftain Þórðr kakali was then sent to Iceland with Bishop Heinrekr to tell the people that they should all consent to be under the rule of King Hákon and to pay suitable taxes. It adds that another bishop was sent to Greenland with the same message.

This passage is problematical for several reasons. The first, though it may perhaps be regarded as a quibble, is that the word *ósannligt* could be taken to mean ‘unfair, unjust’, in which case William’s sentiment would be that since everyone else has to put up with a king so should the Icelanders. The negative view of kingship implicit in such a sentiment, whilst clearly not what the context suggests the cardinal had in mind, is by no means unjustifiable and, as will be discussed shortly, is not without biblical authority. The second reason is that the reference to

Greenland immediately refutes William's assumption that all lands except Iceland serve a king. More important than these issues, however, is the fact that William is unlikely to have made this statement in precisely this form. Certainly he must have supported Norwegian influence over Iceland, as is shown by the appointment of Heinrekr, a Norwegian, as bishop of Hólar; but an Italian like William, who had spent many years in Rome, must have known that there existed several kingless states in Italy and that there was no question of their having kings foisted on them by the Church. It would have been peculiarly deceitful, therefore, if he had encouraged the liquidation of the Icelandic Commonwealth on the basis of the view attributed to him by Sturla. There is, furthermore, a different account of the cardinal's ruling, which says nothing about kings or their supposed governance of all lands. *Þórðar saga kakala* declares that Þórðr kakali and his rival Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who had been struggling with each other to be dominant in Iceland, were made to submit their case to William's judgement. The cardinal favoured Þórðr (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, II 83):

Vildi hann þat eitt heyra, at Þórðr færi þá til Íslands, en Gizurr væri þar eftir—kvað þat ok ráð, at einn maðr væri skipaðr yfir landit, ef friðr skyldi vera.

He would not hear of anything but that Þórðr should then go to Iceland and Gizurr should stay behind—he also said it was advisable for one man to be put in charge of the country, if there was to be peace.

This is a much more plausible version of William's views concerning the government of Iceland, not least because it avoids the difficulties outlined above.

Given that it is unlikely the cardinal actually expressed the sentiment that Sturla attributes to him, the greatest probability must be that the sentence concerning the subjection of Iceland to a king like all other lands was included so as to give ecclesiastical authority, retrospectively, to what had actually happened in the 1260s, and consequently that it was meant to please King Magnús. There is more to the matter than this, however, because the sentence echoes a biblical passage, the context of which suggests several layers of irony in Sturla's use of the idea behind it. The passage in question is in 1 Samuel 8, which deals with events that led to the end of the period of the Judges in the history of ancient Israel. This period, *mutatis mutandis*, bears a certain resemblance to that of the Icelandic Commonwealth: for about four hundred years after fleeing to their adopted land from the oppressive rule of the Egyptian king, the Israelites maintained a society that had no centralised government but was held together with a sense of nationhood by the common observance

of a law code (in this case the religious law handed down by Moses); disputes were set before non-elected judges whose power bases were neither strictly hereditary nor territorial but depended on the prestige built up by the individual judge; towards the end of the period, however, the role of judge was showing signs of becoming a dynastic office and there was widespread dissatisfaction with the integrity of the people who held it, in particular the sons of Samuel (for the biblical source of these statements, see Judges and the early part of 1 Samuel). Samuel himself, perhaps the most prestigious of all the judges, is portrayed as a righteous man with whom God spoke and who, in turn, spoke on behalf of God. It was to him that the elders of Israel turned with a request that a new political system be established (*Biblia sacra* 1999, 1 Samuelis 8: 5): *constitue nobis regem, ut iudicet nos, sicut et universae habent nationes*, 'Make a king for us, to judge us, even as all nations have.' Like any educated man in his day, Sturla would doubtless have known this scripture or at least known its substance; and indeed there exists an Old Norse translation of it, which is probably Icelandic and perhaps of the mid-thirteenth century in origin (Jónas Kristjánsson 1992, 144) though it is preserved only in the later Norwegian compilation known as *Stjórn*.¹ As it appears in *Stjórn* (1862, 440, normalised), the demand of the elders is that Israel should have a king *sem allar aðrar þjóðir hafa*, 'as all other nations have'.

The first irony involved in Sturla's echoing of this passage is that whereas in *Hákonar saga* the representative of the Church invokes the idea that all nations except one have a king, and uses it as a reason for demanding that the Icelanders submit, in the biblical narrative the kingless people themselves demand a monarch on the basis of this idea and in doing so they displease both God and his spokesman. The cardinal is in effect siding with men whom God judges to be in the wrong. Further, the basis of God's anger is that He has been rejected (*Stjórn* p. 440, 1 Sam. 8: 7–8), but the nature of the Israelites' mistake is not only theological but also political, as is made clear when Samuel, at the Lord's express command, gives the Israelites an account of just what it is like to serve under a king. He prophesies what a king will do to them, above all that through confiscations and taxes he will take away both their property and their freedom (*Stjórn* p. 441, 1 Sam. 8: 14–17):

Hann man ok taka vingarða yðra ok akra ok olifutré ok aldingarða, þá er þér eiguð bezta, ok gefa sínum þjónum . . . Sæði yður ok vingarða ok garða ávöxt

¹ In what follows, the scriptures will be quoted in the *Stjórn* version. It is not to be inferred, however, that Sturla actually knew this translation.

ok svá hjarðir man hann tolla ok tíunda, ok gefa geldingum þeim sem honum þjónuðu, ok oka yðr sjálfa undir þröngvan þrældóm.

He shall also take your vineyards and cornfields and olive trees and orchards—the best that you have—and give them to his servants. Your crops and vineyards and fertilised plots, and likewise your flocks, shall he toll and tithe and give to the eunuchs who have served him, and you yourselves shall he yoke under strict servitude.

The end of the whole prophecy could hardly be more emphatic in its contempt for men who surrender their liberty to the hands of a royal master (*Stjórn* p. 441, 1 Sam. 8: 18):

Á þeima degi munu þér kveina ok kalla til dróttins at hann frelsi yðr undan ánauð konungs þess er þér hafið valit yðr; ok er þá vænna at dróttinn vili eigi heyra.

On that day shall you wail and call upon the Lord to free you from under the oppression of the king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and it is then to be expected that the Lord will not hear.

For those who perceived the biblical echo, Cardinal William's words as reported by Sturla would be bound to evoke this strongly negative view of kingship, and consequently to call to mind a positive view of kingless self-government—both of which are at odds with the apparent drift of the passage in *Hákonar saga*. The full range of connotations of the cardinal's words is yet more complex, however, because of further developments in the story told in 1 Samuel. Even though God is angry with the Israelites for demanding a king, He accedes to their request; and this indeed is the *raison d'être* for Samuel's prophecy. Having a king is the punishment for wanting one. On this level, at least, kingship is consistent with the divine will from the moment the Israelites make their demand; furthermore, following the false start in royal government represented by the appointment of Saul as the first king of Israel, Samuel is soon to be found anointing God's own favourite, David (*Stjórn* pp. 459–60, 1 Sam. 16). And from the descendants of King David, in the fullness of time, comes Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1: 1). Thus, it may be argued, kingship was not only authorised by God, despite reservations, but was subsumed into the divine plan of redemption and thus became central to world history. This too would have occurred to those in Sturla's audience who noticed the biblical allusion; or if any of the 'wisest men' who instructed him on behalf of King Magnús failed to look beyond Samuel's speech, doubtless Sturla could have pointed to these facts as evidence that the implications of his reference, whatever their incidental connotations of anti-royalist feeling, work out ultimately in the king's favour.

In conclusion it can be said that there are several levels of significance in the statement that Cardinal William declared it to be improper that Iceland did not serve under a king like all other nations. In the first place, taking the statement on its own terms, it grants high-level ecclesiastical backing to Hákon's wish to bring Iceland under royal control and to legitimise the events of 1262–64 when the Icelandic chieftains subjected themselves to the Norwegian crown. Secondly, in view of its internal contradictions and the probability that the cardinal never said precisely what Sturla attributes to him, the passage indicates that Sturla was working unscrupulously and also, on this level, a little clumsily to please his new master, King Magnús. Thirdly, however, the biblical echo prompts the recollection of Samuel's speech against kings, and hence the thought that the service of kings by its very nature is often costly and demeaning, and that once entered into by a nation it cannot easily be escaped. Along with this there is surely a hint that a day might come when the Icelanders, like the Israelites in Samuel's prophecy, would wail and cry out to be delivered from the oppression of the king whom they had chosen. But beyond this, fourthly, the biblical allusion prompts acquiescence in the face of royal power when its establishment becomes inevitable, as God himself acquiesced and drew kingship into the centre of world history. As for Sturla and his own views, none of the ideas just outlined would have been wholly alien to his mind: he was, as mentioned above, a man who had struggled hard to avoid the royal takeover of Iceland but was ultimately obliged to swear allegiance, and who wrote *Hákonar saga* in order to consolidate himself in royal favour; he then returned to Iceland as *lögmaðr*, the king's highest legal officer; at some later point (presumably) he wrote *Íslendinga saga*, which takes a much cooler view of King Hákon and his interventions in Icelandic affairs; and he was recalled to Norway on a charge of not fulfilling his legal duties with sufficient zeal, but again secured high favour from King Magnús and again turned to writing royal biography (*Magnúss saga*, of which only a small fragment survives). It is evident that Sturla accepted the new dispensation and was a willing participant who made the best of it but who also maintained an independent, by no means committedly royalist, judgement with regard to the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth. The full range of ironies to be found in the declaration put into Cardinal William's mouth, therefore, can be seen to encapsulate rather neatly the conflicting views that we might reasonably suppose were Sturla's own.

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